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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [IR](#) [IZ](#)  
SUBJECT: KARBALA: LOCAL UNEASE AT IRANIAN ACTIVITIES

REF: A) BAGHDAD 2967 B) BAGHDAD 2316 C) BAGHDAD 2812

Classified By: PRT Team Leader Don Cooke for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This is a PRT Karbala Reporting Cable.

11. (S) Summary: Many tribesmen and others in Karbala are mistrustful of Iranian activities here, and Iran's Consul in particular is held in low regard. Some would like to express publicly their displeasure with Tehran's machinations, but refrain from doing so out of fear of retribution. Although a newfound sense of Iraqi Arabism is prompting Karbalans to keep the Iranians at arms' length, Tehran exercises influence through both ISCI and Da'wa. The latter's deepening ties to the tribes are prompting the Iranians to undertake a diplomatic charm offensive aimed at demonstrating the Islamic Republic's friendship. End Summary.

#### Quiet Displeasure

12. (S) Media reports in Iraq and abroad (including in Saudi Arabia's "Al-Watan" newspaper on September 5) have reported that Karbala's tribal association demanded the expulsion of Iranian Consul Ridha Khoda Wardiyan and the closure of the Iranian Consulate and associated cultural/charitable enterprises for undertaking intelligence activities. Officials here, including Governor Aqeel Mahmoud Al-Khazali (Da'wa) and Provincial Council (PC) Acting Chairman Abd al-Al al-Yasiri (independent), were quick to deny that any such gathering took place. PRT contacts in the PC confirm the tribes did not meet, but add that the story reflects genuine displeasure with Iranian attempts to manipulate provincial politics and commerce.

13. (S) In a September 10 discussion with the PRT, independent PC member Hamid al-Hilali explained tribesmen and others in Karbala are angry enough about Iranian machinations to express their fury publicly, but refrain out of fear of Iranian retribution. According to al-Hilali, Karbalans also do not wish to provoke the provincial security apparatus directed by MG Ra'ad Shaker Jawdat al-Hasnawi and MAJ Ali Hamid Hashim. Ra'ad and Ali are no fans of Iran, but people fear that any demonstration would be dealt with firmly by the local Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). Many here have family members who--fearing their views might put them crosswise with the ISF--have fled to Iran. When relatives visit these expatriates (the bulk of whom reside in the Mashhad area) they reportedly are shocked to discover Iraqi criminals and terrorists, including Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) members, also have found safe haven in the Islamic Republic. Al-Hilali claimed persons returning from trips to Iran report that, in exchange for its hospitality and--in JAM's case--training, Tehran and its local consulate are able to direct the assassination in Iraq of persons they regard as enemies.

Iranians Unpopular...

14. (S) Both al-Hilali and PC member Mohsen al-Kenani, who spoke to the PRT on September 9, said that most Karbalans recognize Iran is not a friend. A newfound sense of Iraqi Arabism is giving rise to resentment of "Persian" high-handedness here, Shi'a brotherhood notwithstanding. Iran is seen as giving Iraq nothing but trouble. Consul Wardiyan in particular is reviled, according to al-Hilali. He noted that the Iranian is unable to get out much because many politicians here refuse to be seen associating with him.

To illustrate Wardiyan's isolation, he noted that when the Iranian Consul invited the entire PC to an iftar at the Consulate earlier this month, only three of the 36 members attended.

15. (S) Comment: Karbalans' desire to keep the Iranians at arms' length stands in vivid contrast to their acceptance of the PRT. Political leaders have concluded that the PRT is a positive force in the province, and senior figures are not shy about being seen in public with team members. Provincial officials routinely invite the PRT to local functions attended by the media and do not hesitate to visit FOB Husayniyah for events they know will be covered by the press. End Comment.

...But Still Influential...

16. (S) Wardiyan is not without influence, however. According to al-Hilali, he channels funds from Tehran to both Da'wa and ISCI, with the former being better at cloaking the source of its money. ISCI's four top leaders

BAGHDAD 00003033 002 OF 002

in Karbala--Shaykh Abd al-Hasan Katheer (Al-Hakim Organization), Shaykh Moueen al-Musawi (Badr), Hamid Sahib Mortada (PC Member, Badr), and Husayn al-Shammari (PC member, Badr)--are indiscreet spendthrifts notorious for sponsoring soccer matches by giving clubs 5 million Iraqi dinars (\$4250) to play against one another. Locals like the entertainment, said al-Hilali, but they are under no illusions concerning the beneficence of the Iranian regime and its bagmen here. (Note: Ref C details how Tehran exerts a heavy influence through Karbala's tourism sector. End Note.)

...And Following Da'wa's Lead

17. (S) In a conversation with the PRT on September 14, former governor Ali Kamonah, who now heads the UNAMI Government Liaison Office in Karbala, said that Da'wa's ties to the tribes are increasing. Governor Aqeel announced on September 14 that he will establish 14 tribal "Support Councils" in the province, one in every district and sub-district as well as in the city center. Each will have up to 25 members, with the leaders chosen by Aqeel and, possibly, confirmed by the PC. Presented as a mechanism for hearing from the people, the Councils in fact will be used by the Governor to strengthen Da'wa's grip on political power here, Kamonah said. He added that the visit to Karbala by Prime Minister Maliki during September 12-13 in part was intended to demonstrate high-level backing for Aqeel's initiative. Naturally, observed Kamonah, some members of the PC take a dim view of the Councils, regarding their establishment as a bald attempt to usurp the PC's authority.

18. (S) Iranian officials, Kamonah continued, wish to remain on good terms with Da'wa and so have launched their own charm offensive aimed at winning over the tribes. He said that Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani (whom Kamonah knows personally) gave Aqeel's initiative his blessing and that Tehran has invited some tribal leaders to Iran in order to demonstrate the Islamic Republic's friendship. Owing to Consul Wardiyan's notoriety, the task of wooing the tribes has fallen to two members of his staff, Nada Ali (phone

number 964-790-194-5100) and Sayid Muqaddam. Kamonah described both men as "very active" in Karbala's religious and social circles, noting that Muqaddam is particularly effective because he speaks Arabic fluently.

Comment

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19. (S) Comment: Although both ISCI and Da'wa accept Iranian money in Karbala, this does not necessarily render them beholden to the Islamic Republic's wishes. Of the two, Da'wa appears less likely to be susceptible to Iranian blandishments, despite Tehran's apparent intent to make nice with the tribes. MG Ra'ad and Governor Aqeel (who blames an early 2008 assassination attempt against him on Iran) have made it clear to us that their mistrust of the "Persians"--like that of many tribesmen and other Karbalans--runs deep. End Comment.  
CROCKER